

Cross-Cultural Education: An Auto-Ethnographic Reflection on Teaching in an Intensive English Camp in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Many Americans are interested in teaching English internationally. While much curiosity regarding global English instruction exists, especially among college students and graduates, many of these prospective international teachers may be unsure of what such an experience will truly entail, or have uncertainty regarding best cross-cultural teaching practices. This chapter, through an auto-ethnographic reflection, will further explore the involvements of the authors, who each taught within an intensive English camp in Thailand. Journaling from each author was used to identify particularly important themes from this experience, including the role of emotions such as adventure and excitement, frustration and anxiety; the development of cross-cultural instructional skills; and the building of deep and meaningful cross-cultural relationships. Implications drawn from the authors' experiences that may be useful to prospective or current international and domestic teachers are further explored.

Chapter Keywords: Cross-Cultural Education, Comparative Education, TESOL, Auto-Ethnography, Thailand

An increasingly popular post-college occupation for American graduates is to teach English within various international settings (Swazo & Celinska, 2014). This trend is especially prevalent among new college graduates interested in developing familiarity and practice within education, diversity, or multiculturalism (Cwick & Benton, 2009). As the demand for native English instruction in many parts of the world is great, international English teaching positions are often fairly flexible, allowing those with diverse backgrounds (e.g. native English speakers with nearly any undergraduate degree) to meet typical requirements to enter these positions. The interest in international English education among Americans and other native English speakers is understandable, as not only does such an experience offer a unique and exciting career opportunity, but the compensation for beginning English teachers in some parts of the world, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, can be substantial (Liu, 2012). International English teachers can often work in their home schools or institutions, collecting full-time salaries, while also performing private teaching or tutoring outside of their institutions, thus earning even more than their full-time positions alone can offer (Egan & Farley, 2004). In addition, the cost of living in many areas in which English instruction is in demand is significantly less than in the United States. These various economic factors can combine to create an appealing arrangement for a potentially highly profitable vocational prospect. Of course, financial benefit is only part, and often a small part, of what may entice Americans into international teaching positions. Most international teachers will indicate the real value of such an experience typically has nothing to do with financial earnings, but rather with the development of a globalized outlook on education, communication, and life in general. This is something invaluable from both a professional and personal standpoint in the 21st century which can best be gathered from seeing and experiencing the world first-hand (Mastroianni & Kelly, 2013).

While it is certain that interest in international teaching opportunities exists among many American college and university students and graduates, many prospective international teachers may be unsure of what such an experience will truly entail in a practical sense. The majority of prospective international English teachers have little or no experience with cross-cultural education, which may often lead to unrealistic expectations about the process and its many implications (Patterson, 2014). Such expectations may become especially problematic as these positions are usually fairly long-term (e.g. a minimum of one contract-year) and expensive to initiate because of the initial costs of training, housing, and travel. A better understanding of the experiences of individuals who have previously taught internationally may be useful to those interested in teaching abroad in the future. This chapter will reflect upon the experiences of the authors, each of whom taught in an intensive English camp in Thailand during the summer of 2013. An exploration of important themes drawn from the overseas journalings of each author will be discussed as they may relate or be useful to prospective English teachers.

THE EXPERIENCE

Before exploring the themes drawn from the authors' writings, it is important to first understand the context in which their teaching experience was based. This experience, as well as the backgrounds and understandings of the authors, were distinct for many reasons. At the time of the teaching experience, both authors had completed an undergraduate degree and were admitted to graduate programs. Tobin, age twenty-six, was amidst a doctoral program in higher education and had completed his bachelor's degree in psychology and master's degree in counseling. Lindsey, age twenty-two, had recently completed her undergraduate degree in speech-language pathology and was slated to begin a graduate program in speech-language pathology the following fall. Tobin had some significant previous international experiences as he studied abroad as an undergraduate participating in a HIV awareness program in which he taught health practices to Liberian soldiers in Ghana, Africa, and had briefly backpacked through the Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Both authors, as part of their previous training, had briefly worked in professional positions related to education and teaching. Tobin had been employed as an educational consultant for the state of Indiana, and more recently as an academic advisor in an institution of higher education. Lindsey had completed practicum experiences in speech-language pathology in which she worked directly with clients in need of speech therapy. Both participated in the program partially because of the professional benefit it would provide, but more because of the opportunity to travel to another country, become immersed in a new culture, and meet people from another part of the world.

Many aspects of this teaching experience were highly unique. Unlike a long-term English teaching position, this English camp was brief in nature, as within its various sites it lasted only approximately three weeks. This vastly differs from more permanent English-teaching positions, which, as mentioned previously, usually require a minimum year-long commitment. While the involvement did not closely mimic the time-span of a typical post-graduation teaching experience, it did represent many field studies or shorter study abroad programs that take place during collegiate study. Short-term field studies that range from one to five weeks are common among preparatory study abroad programs: The Institute for International Education (2009) reported that they comprise over 50% of global education programs in the United States. These brief overseas experiences can be a useful exploration strategy, particularly to those who are considering a more permanent international teaching experience, but are not yet willing to commit to a long-term position. Short-term teaching programs can also be especially convenient to those who currently have careers or other obligations in the United States and are unable or unwilling to relocate permanently (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2009). While this experience did, in some ways, reflect the structure of field studies and brief international teaching opportunities, even among these short-term opportunities, it may have had many unique components within its structure and mission.

The camp in which the authors participated was independent from any American governmental organization; however, it was loosely affiliated with a mid-sized Midwestern public university. It was developed and supervised by a person with ties to this specific university, and this coordinator recruited primarily students from this single institution to participate. This camp leader, who was of Thai descent, had been living and working in American higher education for several decades. He oversaw the placement of teachers and worked closely with administrators from the host institutions. The camp teachers were divided within three sites in Thailand, including locations in northern, central, and southern Thailand. Approximately ten English teachers were assigned to each site and each was affiliated with a different Thai university. A slightly different organizational structure was present between sites, although all teachers had similar training, responsibilities, and expectations. At all locations teachers and students resided in a resort or dormitory together for the entirety of the camp. Although evening interaction was not typically coordinated formally, students and teachers often spent time socializing outside of the formal teaching environment because all participants were staying near each other.

Because of the brief timespan of the camp, teachers were only able to receive short and concentrated training. This consisted of a few seminar meetings in the United States before departure, and a few training sessions on-site in Thailand. In addition, teachers received a teaching manual which outlined lessons and materials to implement throughout the camp. The manual was extensive, including daily objectives and activities. In addition, as the camp structure valued collaboration, many teachers worked together to develop specific plans and daily educational activities. Some teachers even regularly combined classrooms to facilitate a co-teaching experience. Class sizes between camps typically ranged from five to ten students per teacher, which allowed rapport to be built quickly. This element of the camp was highly strategic as an important aspect of cross-cultural teaching experiences includes learning that takes place through informal interaction between teachers and their students, which may happen both in and outside of the classroom (Zhang, 2014). Student background and ability with the English language varied significantly among the sites and specific classrooms. Some students spoke English very well, understanding and participating in conversational English easily, while others knew few English words and rarely, if ever, attempted to speak English conversationally.

COMMON EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHERS

Though the experience of teaching in a particular English-teaching setting is always unique, many may also characterize broad elements that may be important or useful to other prospective or current international teachers. International teaching experiences may elicit common thoughts, feelings, practices, and reactions. Themes relevant to this international teaching experience were drawn from the journaling of the two authors of this piece. Each author kept a semi-structured journal that reflected upon the daily activities of the camp, as well as the thoughts and feelings that were elicited throughout the experience. Common themes between the two teachers (the authors of this piece) were established upon a later reflection on the journalings, which was conducted approximately one year after the experience concluded. Within this examination, themes were established based on the amount of attention (e.g. amount of writing) they were given within the journalings. The primary mutual themes included an overall feeling of adventure and excitement early within the experience, a development of cross-cultural instructional skills, feelings of frustration and anxiety, and the building of deep and meaningful cross-cultural relationships.

ADVENTURE & EXCITEMENT

Likely one of the most significant factors influencing prospective educators to consider international teaching is the feeling of adventure such as experience can incite. A feeling of exploration and excitement is typical, especially during the early parts of the teaching experience, as the opportunity is fresh and exhilarating, and allows the teacher him or herself to feel a personal broadening of knowledge regarding the world. Coryell's article (2011) about adult learners and globalization programs eloquently notes that these teachers will be "interacting and learning (from) the sights, sounds, smells, physical sensations, cultural practices, and foreign people and languages when a foreign city is the classroom" (p. 10). This characterization indicates that international teachers, while providing education, are also participating in an active and unique learning experience themselves. Although international teachers are often interested in the education they will be delivering, they are likely also interested in the personal benefit of experiencing a new part of the world.

There is no doubt that global immersion experiences offer both individual development and adventure. While this is likely characteristic, in some way, of the entirety of a teaching program, it is more likely to be identified especially early within the experience (Mumford, 2000). This early stage of travel is often referred to as the "honeymoon phase": during this phase the new location often seems magnificent, and the newcomer teacher may anticipate this new location will be perfect in every way, or at the very least,

better than his or her homeland (Winn, 2009). While the excitement associated with the honeymoon phase does not last forever and may not even last beyond a month or so, it is undeniably an influential factor in the decision of many to teach abroad, especially among those who have traveled internationally for only short periods of time and may have never moved out of the honeymoon phase. Within the journalings examined for this chapter, anticipation and enthusiasm, particularly early within the camp, were prevalent, and each participant characterized the beginning of their ventures as adrenaline-charged. Lindsey wrote:

On Monday, we traveled in busses to meet our students. The 15-minute ride seemed to last an hour. My nerves were calmed as soon as I read the slogan below the 'Prince of Songkla University' sign which read, 'Our soul is for the benefit of mankind'.

Lindsey's response went on to indicate what may be common among international teachers, in that she was initially unsure of what to expect from the program, university, and students she would be working with, which caused some anxiety but mostly anticipation. Tobin similarly wrote within his journal:

Today it begins. I will be going from Louisville to Chicago to Seoul, South Korea, then finally, about 24 hours later, to Bangkok, Thailand. I'm as excited as ever, just ready for this day to end and to arrive in Thailand. I know when I do; my lack of sleep will be worth it.

Tobin wrote about many of the early phases of the experience the way he did about his

pre-departure, and he was clearly excited to see what was ahead. While these experiences are undoubtedly thrilling at some points, this may not be the case throughout the entire experience, as the situation and location will likely soon become much more familiar and predictable. Even in the brief span of this particular teaching program, it was apparent that excitement declined to some degree after arrival for both participants.

This decline in excitement would likely become more significant in English teachers participating in entire year or longer positions. As with any new venture, the unknown aspect of international experiences—the same part that makes them so exciting beforehand—often quickly decreases as the actual experience begins. Some students may find this comforting, especially those who were less interested in exploring the unknown and more attracted to the actual teaching opportunity. Those who are thrill-seekers and mostly attracted to the idea of a new experience, may find this abatement of excitement disappointing. While it is important to note that there may be many exciting parts of an international teaching involvement, and teachers can often continue to travel and explore on vacation or breaks, the anticipation of the beginning parts of the experience are often difficult to duplicate thereafter.

CROSS-CULTURAL INSTRUCTIONAL SKILLS

The experience teaching in an intensive English camp inevitably builds multicultural instructional skills related to cross-cultural communication, perseverance, and persistence within the educational process. A specific skill built through the practice of the authors as it related to cross-cultural communication was that of patience. In the camp where the authors taught, many students were self-conscious about their ability to speak English and initially took much prompting to do so. Even those students who spoke English well often struggled with reading and writing the English language. This trend is common among those learning English as a second language. Research by Phakiti and Li (2011) found that even among non-native English speakers who were graduate students in an English-speaking university, difficulties existed particularly in reading and synthesizing information and academic writing. This consideration is important for new English teachers, as many may think of an international teaching experience as only focusing on development of language and speech, although usually they also include a focus on English reading and writing.

An important part of an effective educational experience in relation to this particular English camp was the ability of the teacher to consistently encourage students to attempt to speak, read, and write in English, even when they felt self-conscious doing so. This often required a high level of patience from the instructor, as well as a conveyance of warmth and understanding. This theme is conveyed repeatedly in the literature as an important aspect among those teaching English to speakers of other languages (Moore, 2013; Sowa, 2009). Both teachers within this account indicated a struggle with some of the cross-cultural communication that took place both in and outside of the classroom setting; however, they also indicated that their ability to be persistent and calm throughout the experience improved significantly, in spite of the short duration of the camp. Tobin described his initial difficulty within this cross-cultural communication as follows:

I don't think I've ever appreciated how important and satisfying communication is as much as I do now. My students are so smart and interesting, and I want so badly to be able to hear what they are saying, but especially with (some students) it is so hard. They sometimes will finally speak, and although I can tell they are speaking in English, I can't tell what they're saying. I'll usually say 'what' a time or two before, if I'm lucky, (another student) repeats more clearly, and I understand. Then, of course, they won't try again for a while.

Tobin's depiction demonstrates how, especially early on within an international teaching experience, cross-cultural communication can be challenging, and can be made more frustrating because of a strong desire to be able to understand.

While Tobin initially found cross-cultural communication challenging, he went on to explain how the expansion of his cross-cultural skills helped to alleviate this problem.

Within the last few days of class, I have really prioritized the exercises in which we read together or the students read a sentence after me. These seem to be less frustrating for everyone because, unlike the more conversational exercises, we all know what is being said. Beyond just helping us to feel productive, I honestly think this is helping me to decipher some of the different accents and pronunciations the students have. Before, I couldn't help correct them because I didn't know what they were saying. Now, not only can I help through guiding these adjustments, but I think I am also able to understand their speech better in general. It's so much better.

Tobin's journaling went on to convey how he made many other strategic decisions within the classroom that helped him become a better teacher and gain a deeper understanding of the inherent cross-cultural communication present within the experience. It was obvious at many points throughout his writing that he wanted to be able to understand the students' speech and their culture more fully than he felt was possible at the time. While this theme never completely diminished throughout his journaling, it was apparent that this concern was lessened even through the brief three-week period in which he wrote. This rapidly developing ability to better understand cross-cultural communication is common among international teachers, as early within the experience this is often highly challenging, but later may often come with much more ease (Kratzke & Bertolo, 2013).

FRUSTRATION & ANXIETY

Related to difficulties with cross-cultural communication are feelings of frustration and anxiety. As the anticipation of international teaching is often great, an unanticipated aspect of the experience—particularly by novice teachers—is the difficulty of teaching learners whose cultural and linguistic background may be unlike those encountered through any previous teaching (Getty, 2011). This occurrence can understandably provoke feelings of apprehension. Making this challenge even more difficult can be the fact that, as mentioned previously, within these English-teaching positions, the skills of foreign students' English abilities are often very diverse, with some barely speaking English while others speak very well. Even among those with similar language skills, significant differences may exist regarding abilities in English reading and writing. This range creates an additional challenge within the classroom, as teachers must learn to simultaneously present to those at very different stages of English aptitude. While the capability of the teacher to meet each student on his or her level may be built over time, this experience can initially feel overwhelming or impossible, especially for those without adequate training in educational techniques and methodologies. Although both participants within this study had previous training within teaching and learning, neither had formal credentials in the field of teacher

education, thus creating some unique challenges. Tobin had been highly involved with international initiatives as a college student, such as previously teaching abroad and participation in various multicultural experiences; however, he had never taught English specifically. He reflected through his journaling on how this was more difficult than he anticipated:

Teaching English is hard. I thought because I'm teaching the language I speak and because I enjoy teaching that it would be easy, but most of the time it isn't. It's hard to explain English logically and sometimes I think I made it more complicated than it needs to be. My strategy for teaching is usually just to talk—but that's probably not the most effective way to teach, especially because (some of the students) don't understand what I'm saying.

Tobin's feeling of uncertainty regarding his teaching methods, which later conveyed a high level of anxiety, is likely common among new English teachers, and was also expressed in some ways by Lindsey. Both wrote about feeling inadequate about their teaching abilities, yet later wrote about their pride in their students' development.

Anxiety and frustration commonly accompany any new professional endeavor, but may be made more prevalent when entering a position in which the professional has very little training. Although the broad nature of necessary training required to enter international teaching positions (e.g. the typical requirement of only a Bachelor's degree in any field of study) is advantageous to those without a teaching credential, it may also make the learning curve for those without adequate experience in education or multiculturalism especially sharp, leading to especially early frustration and anxiety.

CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Undoubtedly, the most memorable and personally valuable aspect of the experience teaching abroad for many, and certainly for the authors of this piece, was the personal relationships that were quickly built between teachers and those within the community and university in which they worked. In their journaling, the authors of this piece focused particularly on the connection they felt with their students. Although the English-teaching camp itself only lasted approximately two weeks, even in this short amount of time, very close friendships were cultivated. This may have been the case for a variety of reasons, such as the immersive nature of the teaching experience itself, which allows teachers and students to work together for an extended period of time each day. Furthermore, teachers within this camp, like many other international teachers who have left their homes, may have felt a sense of vulnerability in this new environment that was eased by connecting with others. It is also possible that the cross-cultural nature of the relationship itself allows for teachers and students to be more willing to make an effort to connect, because of a desire to learn or because of a lack of judgment or assumptions that sometimes accompany inter-cultural relationships. In addition, the residential nature of the camp

which allowed students and teachers to be housed within a single resort or camp space likely allowed a connection to be established more quickly. While these dynamics certainly may have been present and impactful within this experience, a certain unidentifiable factor appeared to be at play as well. Although the journalings mentioned very little that could give insight as to why such strong relationships developed so quickly, they certainly indicated that this happened in an undeniable and powerful way. Tobin wrote:

This morning we had the camp's closing ceremony. Each group's students presented a Power-Point presentation on what they learned through the camp. It was difficult to know it was the last time seeing everyone, but they made the presentations entertaining and funny, so it wasn't as bad as I expected. . . I'll miss being here, and mostly the people here . . . they are open, giving, and hilarious—people I wish I could be more like.

Lindsey echoed a similar sentiment about connections she built in the short span of her trip, indicating simply that, for her, the cross-cultural relationships were the most meaningful and memorable part of the experience. Lindsey wrote: "My roommate in Thailand and I decided that the camp had a hidden agenda. We thought we were just going to teach English, but what we learned was that even halfway around the world—people are just people."

IMPLICATIONS IN PRACTICE

The various themes drawn from the journaling of the authors may have practical implications for those interested in similar endeavors, whether short or long-term, in Asia or in other parts of the world, or even for those teaching English to speakers of other languages domestically. While themes such as cross-cultural communication and relationship development have been readily explored in the literature, examining these themes from a first-person prospective can provide additional insight, allowing for a more humanistic understanding of how an occurrence was truly experienced by those who were immersed within it. This research can be incorporated in the action of effective program coordination and practice by administrators, scholars, teachers, or even new-language learners themselves.

Although not generalizable towards the population at large, the experiences of the authors can give understanding to how some may experience international teaching, allowing for a better understanding of the process itself, as well as how to be successful within it. For example, as with the authors of this chapter, adventure and excitement are typically among the most powerful factors pushing a person towards an international teaching experience, but these feelings may not last forever. Those interested in international teaching should honestly assess and adequately explore, prior to making a commitment within international education, how these factors may be influential to their personal fulfillment and

ability to successfully perform job duties in both the short and long-term. While it is of course the prerogative of the prospective teacher to choose how to prioritize aspects of an international teaching experience, it is recommended that one consider the sometimes short-lived span of the feeling of excitement. International teaching may continuously be thrilling for some, but many others may quickly grow accustomed to the routine that often accompanies a teaching position. Even in the best-case scenario, the feeling of excitement typically should be expected to wane after some time in the new setting. Should excitement be a primarily motivator, prospective teachers ought to consider how this feeling may or may not be consistent throughout their international teaching experience, and how this may affect their teaching.

Cross-cultural communication, another theme drawn from the journaling of the authors, is highly important to the practice of various teachers both within and outside of traditional classrooms. Patience appeared to be central to the development of this communication, especially in those cases in which a high level of anxiety was felt by students. Cunningham (2014) found that, likely because of the nervousness experienced by many new English speakers (e.g. students), another strategy to alleviate apprehension and build comfort within the classroom is to use a low-level background music. This method could be used by conversational English teachers as a strategy to make the environment seem less intimidating and more conversational. Teachers may consider beginning their teaching experience by incorporating music that is native to the students into the classroom, as this may help students feel more at ease. Later, however, incorporating American music may continue to alleviate anxiety while simultaneously allowing for teachable activities such as asking students to identify lyrics and convey their meaning. While using music is an example of strategy that may be useful in developing cross-cultural communication, prospective teachers should make informed decisions about how to incorporate music, or any other pedagogical choices, based on a socio-cultural awareness of the particular community of students, to help build cross-cultural communication (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005).

In summarizing this chapter it is important to note that common characteristics may accompany many international teaching experiences, and some international teachers may closely relate to the experiences of the authors; however, each experience is unique based on its administration, organization, purpose, and location of the program. It is imperative that potential English teachers consider the individual characteristics of differing types of teaching opportunities in which they may hold interest. Prospective teachers can often explore information regarding specific teaching sites in depth, especially with the convenience of websites, digital journals, and message boards that are usually easy to locate on-line. While not every international teaching site has an in-depth critical review that is easy to access digitally, many will, at minimum, give prospective teachers information regarding their mission, values, standard teacher compensation, and various other pieces of information that may be important in a preliminary evaluation. In addition, prospective English teachers should know that nearly

all long-term English teaching positions require a telephone or digital (e.g. FaceTime or Skype) interview process prior to an offer being extended or accepted. While Americans may often think of interviews as an opportunity solely for the employer's evaluation of the job candidate, prospective English teachers should also use this opportunity to evaluate the employer and the opportunity at large. Prospective teachers may consider examining how the educational establishment fits his or her specific wants and needs. In general, it is strongly suggested that prospective English teachers thoroughly investigate the site upon which they ultimately agree to teach. Generalizing all international schools and other educational establishments into a single category is naive. Just like within American education, much variety exists within differing types of opportunities. In addition, those who wish to teach abroad should consider how their cultural background, educational training and experience, and capacity to adapt to a new and altered environment may affect their satisfaction within an international teaching experience.

International teaching can be an exhilarating, insightful, and highly valuable experience. For those who enjoy teaching and traveling, it is certainly an option to be considered. While in general the experience provides many magnificent opportunities, there are aspects that must be considered beforehand. Before committing to international teaching at any length, prospective teachers should gather as much knowledge as possible about what is to be expected from their site. While many factors can be impactful within the experience, and there is much information to consider, the authors of this piece would like to conclude with a final recommendation about international teaching: if you are interested in a unique opportunity which will build cross-cultural competency in a variety of contexts, you should do it.

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